

Growing Concerns
A Question and Answer Column with Dr. Marti Erickson
www.MomEnough.com

Question: I'm wondering about how I can stay connected with my 17-year-old son. It seems that every time I try to talk with him he tells me to stay out of his life. On the positive side, he still gives me a hug now and then, but it's only when he initiates it.

Answer: You're experiencing what many parents go through as their children move toward adulthood, and, although this is not unusual behavior, it is hurtful and puzzling for parents. Assuming that your son is not showing other risk signs, such as a drop in school performance, withdrawal from activities, or a sudden change in friendships, his behavior with you probably is not cause for serious concern. But it does require extra sensitivity and patience to preserve those important parent-child connections during this stage of his development.

Your son's behavior says it's important for him to feel that he's in charge. In a way, he's practicing for the upcoming time when he'll be on his own, going off to school or work. And, in some ways, he may be pushing you away now to make that separation easier. (I remember when my normally warm and pleasant son, then a senior in high school, became distant and even surly with my husband and me. Then one day, in a flash of insight, he said, "Maybe I just need to make you mad so it'll be easier for me to leave.")

Your challenge now is to let your son know that you respect his increasing need for independence and privacy as he gets ready for adulthood, but that you also are there to give him steady love and guidance. Here are some steps that may be helpful:

- When your son turns away from your efforts to connect with him, simply and calmly say to him, "I know you need more freedom and privacy now than you had when you were younger, and I'm trying to respect that. And I still care about you and will be here to love and support you."
- Defuse a tense situation by acknowledging, "You're really growing up and I'm trying to figure out a new way to be a mom to someone who's almost an adult."
- Be clear that there are some things you do need to know about your son's life -- not because you're nosy, but because you are still his parent and responsible

for his safety and wellbeing. Even though teens often resist their parents' questions, they suffer more when they think parents don't care. Research on adolescent health and wellbeing shows that teens do best when their parents stay connected, know what their kids are doing and who they're with, and communicate clear expectations about school performance, substance use, and sexual behavior. Teens may not like it at the moment, but in the long run they thrive when they have steady support and guidance.

- Pick up on your son's cues at the times when he is willing to connect, being there to listen and laugh together. Often these are fleeting moments during transition times, such as when he first comes home from school or when you're in the car together running errands. (Many teenagers talk much more openly if they're side-by-side in the car, rather than face to face.) Those little moments of togetherness add up and make a big difference in the long run.

- Finally, treasure those hugs! Many parents would be thrilled if their teenage sons initiated a hug. It's common for teenage boys to go through a period of being uncomfortable with physical affection from their parents, but that usually changes by the time they know they're really adults. As my son assured me when he was going through that distant stage, "I'll want to hug you again when I'm 25."

Copyright 2002
Marti Erickson, Ph.D.